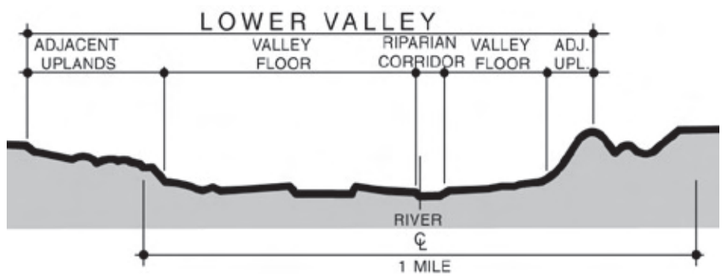
Lower Valley

Intent: The Lower Valley extends from the eastern edge of Mission Valley Preserve to Interstate 15. The valley has developed intensely since WWII, and is arguably the most altered section of the river. It is also the most complex.

The Lower Valley segment of the San Diego River Park can serve many roles: a focal point for new development and re-development, a link between adjacent uses (stadium, hotels, shopping, library, food and drink) and a common space for neighboring communities. The San Diego River Park may take on its most urban character along this section, with plazas or amphitheaters reaching out from development at the edge of the river.

For the San Diego River Park to succeed, however, it is essential that development reorient itself towards the river to provide a synergy with the river corridor, while providing "breathing room" for wildlife habitat, trails, natural open space, and public spaces. By re-vegetating adjacent areas and rights-of-way with native species, the infrastructure that has disconnected the side canyons may serve as the means to reestablish wildlife connections to upland open space.



Lower Valley Section

Condition: The Lower Valley is heavily suburbanized; extensive paving in the form of parking lots and roadways, massive infrastructure projects and relatively low density development surround this reach. The river's presence is further marginalized by channelization and ponding. Simple lack of space presents a severe hydrological constraint throughout the Lower Valley, and exotic vegetation negatively impacts the reach's native ecosystems.

The communities of the Lower Valley and above the valley walls are particularly deficient in active recreation space available and the San Diego River Park should play a role in addressing this need. Little undeveloped space or public land exists within this reach, offering limited opportunities for the river to meander, for wildlife habitat to expand, or for the creation of parks and trails.

Recommendations:

- Create a continuous trail.
- Acquire land and/or establish open space easements.
- Establish appropriate open space corridor width
- Pursue opportunities to acquire a portion of Riverwalk Golf Club if it redevelops.
- Create a major park and open space adjacent to the river and the Qualcomm Stadium site.
- Create interpretive opportunities at pedestrian bridge crossings where the river can be seen and experienced.
- Restore river at former water hyacinth water treatment plant and provide interpretive information regarding previous use and river rehabilitation processes.
- Explore potential sites for a Heritage Farm, a historic agriculture interpretive site and community garden; create connections from Farm to surrounding area.

Lower Valley looking northwest

The heavily suburbanized condition of this reach should be seen less as a deterrent for future park scenarios than as a fulcrum upon which innovative park solutions can be leveraged. The San Diego River Park has the potential to combine 'natural' programs, such as the healthy hydrology of the river and its ecological habitat, with 'urban' programs, such as active and passive recreation and an accessible and urban corridor edge. By inviting activities such as field sports, entertainment, and shopping into the corridor, the river becomes a place of varied experiences. An active river scene will reach out to a large number of user groups and introduce the river's historic and modern faces to a broad spectrum of people. The rights of way associated with the valley infrastructure present key opportunities to establish gateways into the valley and the city, and to extend the color and texture of native plant communities throughout the valley.

Space for the river must be sought out in the Lower Valley. Open space easements and property acquisition are necessary for the San Diego River Park to become a success. The future redevelopment of Riverwalk Golf Club and Qualcomm Stadium are two opportunities for creating parks and open space.

The Valley should be considered as a whole, and consistent recommendations regarding new development, streets and landscape should be established. These guidelines should set the character of the valley, moving it toward being a greener place planted with native species that concentrates higher-density away from the river edges. Moving density away from the river will allow the San Diego River Park to provide for appropriate corridor width. Where little space is available, these corridors should aim to maintain the most adaptable species. Where greater corridor width can be achieved, the San Diego River Park should seek to accommodate more sensitive species that have greater habitat requirements.

Lower Valley from University of San Diego looking southeast

Key Sites:

Riverwalk Golf Club Redevelopment Site

The Levi-Cushman Specific Plan for the Riverwalk Golf Club site was approved in 1987. The plan proposes roughly 5.2 million square feet of mixed-use development including residential, retail, commercial, office and recreational uses for the approximately 200 acre site. The Specific Plan aligns with the San Diego River Park Draft Master Plan in focusing development on the river, and this concept should guide future modifications to the plan. The Specific Plan departs from San Diego River Park goals in proposing a 12-acre island as well as a 25-foot river planting buffer intended to "prevent direct access to habitat areas". These recommendations should be modified to favor a naturalized river pattern as suggested in this Plan, increasing the channel width, creating meander and separating the stream flow from any existing ponds.

The San Diego River Park Trail can serve the site by providing an amenity to people living and working within the proposed development, as well as providing pedestrian and bicycle commuter access to surrounding neighborhoods and the trolley. The trolley right of way may offer the opportunity for an interim trail alignment, until a more defined redevelopment concept can determine the best permanent location.

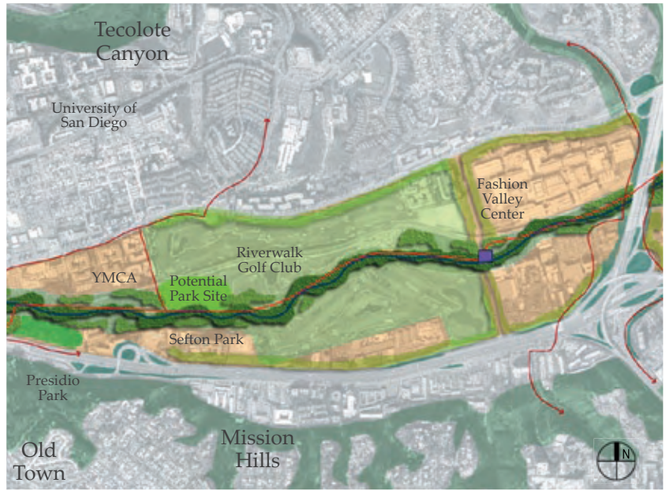
Because Riverwalk is anticipated to redevelop in the future, there is an opportunity to establish a neighborhood-scale park here. As the site redevelopment plans evolve, 10-15 acres of public space should be sought adjacent to the river but buffered with naturalized open space. The nearby YMCA is expected to continue its private, fee-based recreation facility as will Sefton Park little league field. Connection to these facilities could be strengthened with connected open space and a trail head near the YMCA. While the previous Mission Valley community plan calls for a neighborhood park at the YMCA site, usable land is at a premium, and environmental conflicts with the nearby wetlands are obstacles that make community park acreage unlikely.

Potential Neighborhood Park Elements

- Active recreation and children's play area
- Location visually or conceptually connected to the river
- Character reflects the river's ecology and history
- River function incorporated into design

Key Points

- Critical location for continuity of the San Diego River Park Trail and for meeting basic park and recreation needs in Mission Valley.
- Acquisition of 10-15 acres is recommended to establish a neighborhood park.
- Existing Specific Plan proposes extensive development, and further ponding and channelization of the river.
- In the short term, the multi-use path should be developed following the trolley alignment, within the trolley right-of way. In the long term, the multi-use path should be developed adjacent to the Open Space Corridor.
- Establish an appropriate open space and habitat corridor width. The open space and habitat corridor should provide adequate width to re-contour the river channel to allow for increased river length and meander and to expand native riparian habitat.



Riverwalk Golf Club

Multi-use path at Riverwalk

The river is unprotected from runoff through the golf course

View of Presidio from Riverwalk Golf Club

Qualcomm Stadium

The City of San Diego and the San Diego Chargers have been in negotiation regarding the future of Qualcomm Stadium, including the potential to construct a new stadium on the site. The potential redevelopment of the stadium also creates the opportunity for a river-oriented approach that creates significant new open space and park land on this site. Such a park should be a minimum of 20 to 40 acres. The site should be adjacent to the river, but buffered with substantial naturalized open space that allows for a wider river channel and increased riparian habitat, transitioning to upland native vegetation at the trolley alignment.

This site is the last remaining city owned property that is large enough to be in scale with the river valley and the city itself. Careful consideration should be given to the intrinsic value of this place as a public green space. As a regionally scaled, river-oriented park providing naturalized open space adjacent to the river as well as recreation facilities, it can act as a complement to Mission Bay Park, Balboa Park and Mission Trails Regional Park.

Key Points

- Land is currently owned by City of San Diego.
- Critical location for meeting basic park and recreation needs in Mission Valley.
- Critical location for creating continuity in San Diego River Park and San Diego River Park Trail.
- Potential for site to redevelop for more intensive use makes time critical to taking action.
- Develop community scale park with an extensive naturalized component adjacent to the river corridor; this park should have an extensive naturalized component. Locate passive recreation on north and south sides of trolley alignment, active recreation on current stadium site.
- Provide multi-use and pedestrian trails adjacent to river corridor.
- As the site specific development plan is prepared, establish an appropriate open space and habitat corridor that achieves wildlife movement and habitat objectives, varying in width and extending to the trolley alignment. The open space and habitat corridor should provide adequate width to re-contour the river channel to allow for increased river length and meander and to expand native riparian habitat.
- Extend open space corridor between proposed stadium location and I-15 to create new habitat and trail connection to Murphy Canyon.
- The "Mission City" bridge project was proposed by the City in 2002, but was not approved. This project may be reconsidered. In order to insure the goals of the San Diego River Park, it is important to co-ordinate with any possible bridge proposals.

Potential Program Elements

- Natural riparian and upland habitat areas
- Ball fields
- Picnic facilities
- Amphitheater
- Boardwalk/overlooks for fishing
- Boardwalk/overlooks for bird watching
- Play area with "natural" character (wood, boulders, sand)
- Pedestrian linkage: park to river and Murray Canyon
- Focus park toward river

In the event of future redevelopment of the Qualcomm Stadium site, the opportunity would exist for a river-oriented approach that creates significant new open space and parkland on site.

Alternative Scenarios

Four alternative scenarios are explored here to reveal a range of potential approaches to increase open space on the site while accommodating the existing stadium, a new stadium, or no stadium at all. In all scenarios, the land between the trolley line and the river should become naturalized open space, with a wider river channel and expanded riparian habitat; green connections should be created through the site linking Murphy Canyon, Mission Village Drive to the river and reaching toward Ruffin Canyon; and the existing pavement be replaced with a porous pavement that reduces surface runoff and improves groundwater recharge and natural filtration to clean urban runoff before it reaches the river. These are prepared as conceptual ideas only, and are not based upon specific economic and programmatic goals.

Qualcomm Stadium Site

Stadium replaced with a Mission Valley Central Park

This site is the single largest publicly owned land in the valley. It is the only opportunity to create park and open space that is in scale with the City as a whole and the river valley itself. A new regionally oriented park in this location would become a major destination between Mission Bay Park and Mission Trails Regional Park and reestablish a sense of the valley floor as a place. This regional facility would serve many roles, each emphasized by its scale. This 160 acre park would create significant new riparian and upland habitats that link to adjacent canyons, eliminate a significant source of urban runoff and provide adequate space for natural filtration of remaining runoff before it reaches the river, provide adequate land to meet City park, open space and recreation goals for Mission Valley; and provide adequate space to reveal the many roles the valley has played through history, from Kumeyaay villages through Spanish settlement and early American agriculture. As another regionally scaled focus, the Mission Valley Central Park would be a logical location to create a major access point to the river, with a visitor and interpretation center and other community and regionally oriented recreational facilities.

Stadium replaced with a Mission Valley Central Park

Stadium replaced with Park and Mixed Use Development

Removing the stadium creates the opportunity for substantial increase in park and open space in Mission Valley. By allowing a limited extent of mixed use development, the City of San Diego will appreciate economic return from this valuable site. The development should emphasize a river orientation, and serve as a model for sensitive and sustainable design, setting the standard for other redevelopment in the valley. A significant new park of 80 acres is created, allowing for community and regionally oriented recreational facilities and substantial natural open space. This natural open space system can provide for riparian habitat along the river and upland habitat that would extend toward Murphy Canyon, Mission Valley Drive and Ruffin Canyon, thereby giving a natural habitat structure to the park.

Stadium replaced with Park and Mixed Use Development

Existing Stadium Improved

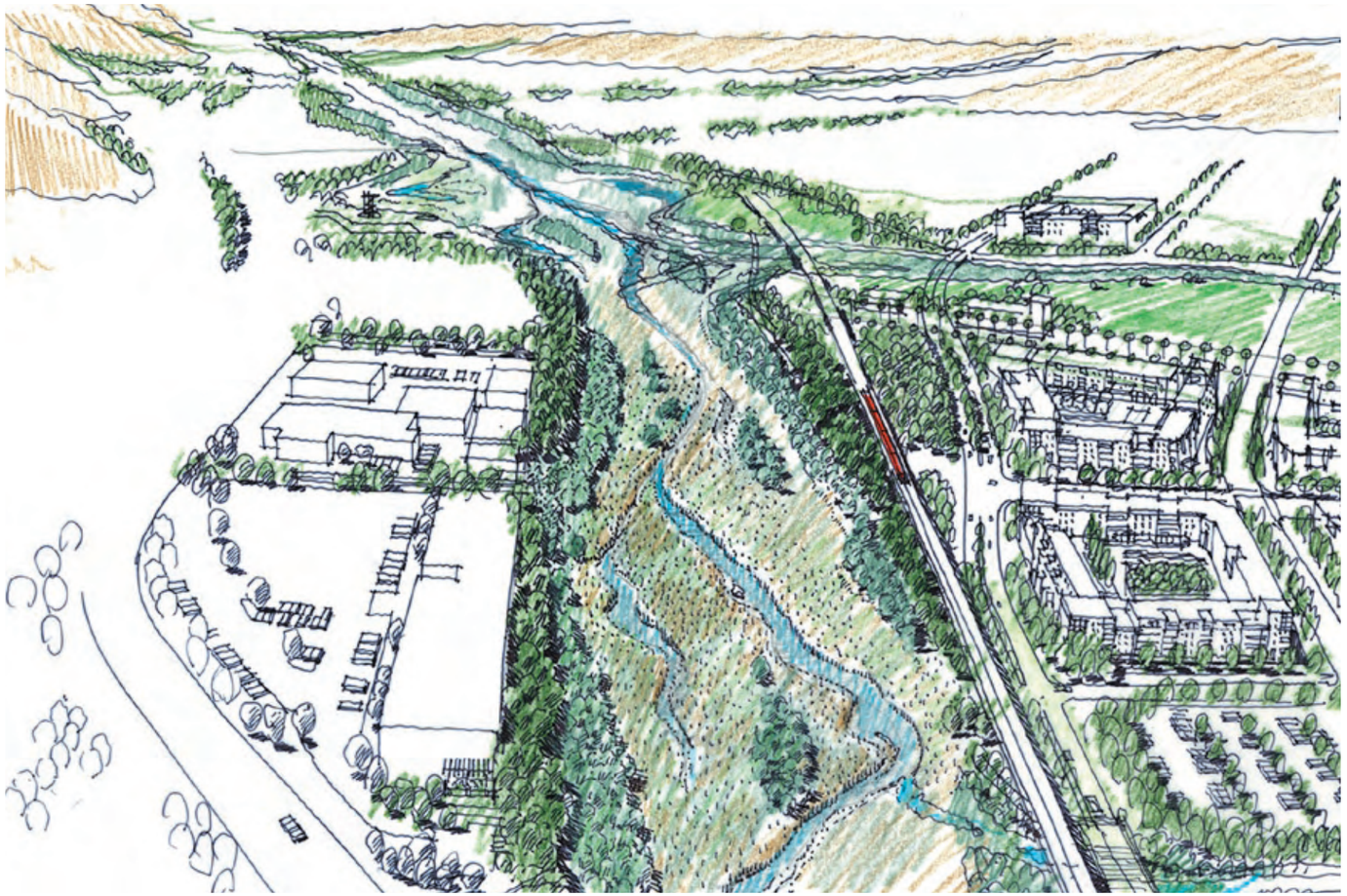
If the existing stadium were to remain, the site can be substantially improved by creating mixed use development along Friars Road that incorporates structured parking, thus reducing the need for existing parking along the river. The development is set within a native upland landscape to create a visual and textural extension of the river corridor. An active park is created in the southwest corner of the site, north of the trolley alignment, set within an upland native landscape. Natural park "fingers" extend from the river through the site to Friars Road. These fingers serve as access corridors and storm water filtration channels cleansing runoff before it reaches the river.

Existing Stadium Improved

New Stadium

This scenario would recommend a new stadium relocated on-site that would support a consolidation of open space. Thereby increasing its function as habitat and its visual continuity and impact. Natural "fingers" extend from the river to link Murphy Canyon and Mission Village Drive with the river and serve as stormwater filtration channels. An active park is created on the site of the existing stadium, linked to the river by the naturalized finger. Green corridors should extend from the river to all proposed new development, creating a sense that the development is nested within the river environment.

New Stadium



San Diego River and Qualcomm Stadium Conceptual Site Redevelopment

Murray Creek Enhancement

Murray Creek currently passes under Friars Road just east of its intersection with SR-163. It is channelized, lined with rip rap (large rocks of a fairly uniform size), then enters four large culverts passing under the alignment of the proposed extension of Hazard Center Drive and drains into the San Diego River.

Enhancing Murray Creek will offer the opportunity to celebrate the confluence of tributary and river, improve water quality flowing into the river and expand wildlife habitat. The Murray Creek channel should be widened where feasible from a flood control standpoint, and the rip rap removed or visually softened with plantings of native vegetation species. Two alternative approaches should be considered, both of which involve removal of the culverts. One alternative that should be explored fully is to consider not extending Hazard Center Drive, and creating a cul-de-sac and small parking area that can serve as an access point to the San Diego River Park and Trail. The other alternative is to extend Hazard Center Drive, and to replace culverts with a bridge structure that is adequate to allow growth of riparian vegetation beneath it, thus increasing the potential for wildlife movement to the river, with adequate space for a spur trail connecting nearby residences and retail development to the San Diego River Trail. The Murray Creek area can support wetland and riparian woodland vegetation, transitioning to Diegan Sage Scrub at higher elevations adjacent to SR-163 and surrounding development. Interpretive signage at the trail and arrival points can increase awareness of the canyon-valley physiography and the presence of side canyon streams. Signage on the bridge should identify Murray Creek. Plantings of trees along SR-163 will buffer the Creek from views to traffic and link it with the "Green Gateway" proposed along SR-163 as it crosses the river valley.

Murray Creek along SR-163

Culverts under alignment of Hazard Center Drive future extension

Murray Creek outfalls